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ROLES OF INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS IN THE NEW INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Roles of Information Professionals in the New Information Environment

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Abstract - In an era of information explosion and the global shift in acquiring, storing, and disseminating information in Internet era, made a substantial change in the work environment of library and information professionals. Now, Library profession is one of the most challenging professions in the knowledge society. Librarians face complex challenges posed by recent trends in Information and Communication Technology. The role of the Library professional has become more dynamic and challenging in the modern world. This paper covers the role of library and information service professionals that have undergone a large degree of change in recent years. It also outlines and discusses the professional skills and technological competencies necessary for library professionals and considers how these are acquired and developed to survive in the ever changing technological environment and to meet the future challenges. Technology alone cannot help to bring about the required changes. Libraries will truly be benefited to the user community if the attitudes, practices, and the application of new technologies can be properly adopted by the library professionals.

Keywords - Knowledge Management, Professional Competencies,Web Environment, Information & Communication Technology, Continuing Professional Development, Digital Preservation, Internet Developer.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in an information society where the development of information technology and telecommunication network is accompanied by a corresponding increase in knowledge with a rapid growing flow of information. This new information environment requires new skills in searching, processing and using information. In this changing scenario library is no longer a store house of knowledge, now it becomes an access facilitator without walls collection, giving access to relevant information. And, the role of the library and information professionals in this new environment has been completely changed. They plays an intermediary role to supply right information to the users at the right time.

DEVELOPMENT FROM TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL LIBRARIES

With the introduction of new technologies in libraries, traditional techniques and tools have been replaced by the new ones. Most of the libraries have started providing an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), access to CD-ROM, Internet and digital documents. Many of them have created their homepages on the Web form where users can have access to a variety of services from their workplaces or homes. The transition of the traditional library to digital library is well reflected in a number of digitization projects going on at the national and global levels. The libraries have started digitizing their resources and making these available over the World Wide Web and providing online services to the users. But in spite of numerous digitization projects, electronic media by no means have completely replaced the printed material. There is still a lot of paper in our libraries and we expect this to be the case for a long time to come. The paper-less library will exist with the digital library for the foreseeable future. The situation necessitates the librarian to acquire, give access to, and safeguard carriers of knowledge and information in all forms and to provide instruction and assistance in the use of the collection to which their users have access.

ADVENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The advent of Information technology and its invasion almost in all areas of LIS has added new dimensions to LIS by providing avenues to create global network of libraries, offer reference and various other services much better and faster, to open a floodgate of digital preservation and save contents of documents that were on the verge of extinction, to improve house-

keeping operations, to make LIS professionals computer literate, and so on. Above all Information Technology has helped to heighten the status of LIS professionals in the eyes of the authorities. It has taken LIS a long way from a soft discipline towards a hard discipline.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge management is an old concept, a function traditionally performed by librarians. But, in the digital era, this term has taken on nuances that point to the need to rethink the old paradigms to reconsider who the new knowledge management players in the academy might be. According to one definition, knowledge management is the process of transforming information and intellectual assets into enduring value. It connects people with the knowledge that they need to take action, when they need it. The prime to knowledge management is capturing the knowledge of process how organizations get their work done and of how various elements of information connect to this process. Two different types of information are necessary to accomplish this: explicit and tacit. Explicit information is packaged, easily codified, transferable, and communicable. Tacit information, on the other hand, is personal, context-specific, difficult to formalize, and hard to communicate and transfer. Combining these two types of informationusing formal and informal information to guide processesprovides the perceived value of knowledge management. The focus is on unravelling individual know-how and applying it to explicitly driven processes so that the pinpointed knowledge is available to the exact people at the right time.

These concepts are being applied in limited and often modest scale in industrial settings. The commercial world hopes to capture the promised efficiencies of knowledge management in order to gain competitive market advantage. The knowledge management paradigm has even been referred to as the next generation approach that provides organizations with valuable, credible, and insightful informationa tremendous asset and a unique advantage. Thus companies are generating databases, links to Web sites, and portals to facilitate the integration of explicit and tacit information. The questions to be raised here are whether this change is applicable to higher education? Although academic libraries have focused quite effectively on collecting, organizing, and presenting information, the Web adds an entirely new dimension. Knowledge management in an academic setting must encompass the community of scholars in a given discipline and must be able to integrate publications, data sets, tools for manipulating such data, connections to databases of pictures and images, and much more. Portal technology is being used by corporations to bring together tacit and explicit information in a push technology framework. This also has potential in the academic environment because of its ability to help screen and filter information to the users.

ROLE OF LIBRARY PROFESSIONALS IN THE NEW ENVIRONMENT

In the new information environment, the librarians have to perform the role in the following areas.

INFORMATION ACCESS PROVIDER AND NEGOTIATOR

Information professionals assume the responsibility of providing access to information in whatsoever form it is packaged i.e. audio, video, microform, numeric, computer programmes or multimedia in this new environment. They will no longer be restricted to "a single entity where everything is stored", but rather will able to offer a range of services and collections linked together or more accessible through electronic networks. In such an environment "access to information does not always imply ownership, merely that the library has negotiated the means by which the patrons gain access to resources and information". There is a clear shift from ownership towards providing access to electronic documents just for a given time. This in turn has created a new role for librarians that of negotiating access rights through contracts and licenses. This payment is not for the ownership of all the rights of that product, e.g. in the case of e-journals it is the publisher who decides how much access will be provided, which issues will be available and how much access will cost. Cost of e-resources has become difficult to calculate. Publishers today have come up with a large variety of new pricing strategies, e.g. 'pay per view' and 'flat fees plus additional charges accounting to usage'. This means that different libraries may have to pay different prices for journal subscription. Here the librarians have to see how best they can negotiate access rights through contracts and licenses.

AS AN INTERMEDIARY

In a library, Professionals have been in direct contact with users seeking information.They have learnt to understand what they actually need and not what they say they need. Their services are personalised and targeted for their clientele. When the users retrieve tens of thousands of matches from digital libraries, many realize that searching and filtering information can be complex task which should be delegated to a professional. Selecting the matches most relevant, most current and of high quality requires considerable expertise, despite continuing improvements in search refinement capabilities of digital libraries. Libraries that possess particular knowledge and expertise in knowledge transfer seem to be the most suitable candidates for this.

ORGANIZER OF INFORMATION

In the web based environment, information is rapidly growing, highly distributed with varying quality and

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dynamic in nature. Librarians, who have acquired a good deal of efficiency and skill in the collection, organization and retrieval of information can play an effective role in adapting these to the new environment and even to go beyond these skills and develop new ways to organize and structure information. For librarians to effectively organize and structure information available on the Internet, they require more than basic IT skills.

AS A GUIDE

The modern day librarians must not only be proficient in the wide range of information technologies available today but they must also be able to work with teachers to adopt information literacy in their students. Information literacy is the key to life-long learning.The Librarians must teach the students how to analyse information critically and use it wisely.They must work closely with students to design, implement and revise research skills. Within the University environment undergraduate students can be seduced by the convenience of information available through the internet and the intervention of the librarian can teach the difference between intellectual access and electronic access. Librarians should teach information discrimination through personalised research assistance, guidance and instruction.

CONTENT DEVELOPER

Content creation and development is recognized as an important activity in the digital environment. Through technically a new concept, it has been practiced by the librarians since long. The library cataloguing, abstracting and other related guides to information sources are the best examples in this context. However, the growing emphasis of this aspect in the digital environment requires some new approaches in its design and development.

The librarians are expected to posses some refined skills in data organization and structuring and the presentation of the content in a helpful format so as to provide easy retrieval of required information for the users. Library professionals must become involved with the process of improving access to significant internet content.

AS PRESERVER OF DIGITAL PRESERVATION

Digital preservation strategies are shaped by the needs and constraints of repositories with little consideration for the requirements of current and future users of digital scholarly resources. Preserving information in its different forms has been an important endeavour on the part of the librarians since time immemorial but preserving information in the digital form is posting the biggest challenge today.While printing materials can survive for centuries or even

millennia without recuperation and rehabilitation, digital materials because of their fragile record that is a matter of concern for us, the authenticity and retrievability must also be guaranteed. This involves transforming digital documents to run on current media, software, hardware and operating systems by applying one or more digital preservation strategies such as technology preservation, emulation, data migration, and encapsulation. It is high time for the librarians to develop and implement proper policies and strategies to ensure long-term sustainability of and accessibility to the digital records.

SKILLS NEEDED TO PERFORM THE CHALLENGING ROLES

The digital library environment requires a new set of competencies for librarians. Information professionals must possess to perform their role effectively are of two kinds:-

TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES

1. Ability to keep up with new ideas in technologies and libraries

2. Ability to embrace change

3. Comfort in the online medium

4. Ability to troubleshoot new technologies

5. Ability to easily learn new technologies

MANAGEMENT SKILLS

1. Ability to evaluate the needs of all stakeholders

2. Ability to question and evaluate library services

3. Vision to translate traditional library services into the online medium

4. Ability to sell ideas/library services

If librarians can adapt to and embrace change, they can easily learn technologies, can keep up with changes in the profession, can plan or new services and evaluate old services, can develop services that meet the needs of all stakeholders, can evaluate technologies, and can sell their ideas and market services. They will be better able to meet the challenges of changing user population and changing technologies. Besides the technical and management competencies, the future librarian should possess learning and teaching competencies. Learning how to learn is one of the core skills of the information

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professional, and applying that skill through a constant process of learning both formal and informal, will be a hallmark of a professional career. Teaching or rather helping others to learn - is also an integral part of the information professional's skill set. Helping end users to make best use of the tools which are available, developing their search skills, and above all giving them insights into how they can evaluate the quality of st information are among the most important activities of the 21 century information professional. To be able to do this the information professional of the future will need to have some understanding of pedagogical theory and practice and of effective methods of teaching and learning.

For the information professional, the question must be how to unlearn and relearn how to maintain a valid role in provision of information at a time when developments in technology have brought the power of information searching to the non-specialist. The answer must be that the information professional develop additional value-added skills.

CONCLUSION

A librarian with diverse talents and training, and who is flexible, will be able to meet the challenges of future library scene. An ideal librarian is one who is competitive and assertive, who is cooperative and willing to compromise, one who is intellectually committed, who is equipped with technical and managerial competencies, who is enthusiastic to the needs of new technology at the same time not being emotionally attached to any one system. Librarians should be ready to participate in the process of generating and distributing information and knowledge for quality of life and education for all. In short, librarians must unite to withstand the revolutions that will occur in the information and communication fields. Technology alone cannot help bring about the required changes. Attitudes, practices, and policies need to change if libraries are to truly benefit themselves and their community of users by the application of new technologies.

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